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ABSTRACT

There are many teaching positions for writing instructors outside the classroom, such as continuing education programs for business and professional people. Instructors interested in tapping this market should watch for opportunities and not overlook small or unusual jobs. They should also clarify their goals, start small, and remember the audience. Clear goals can help the instructor focus his or her effort on a specific result, such as improving the readability of legal writing, while starting at a small job allows the teacher to build experience in a new field. Remembering the audience is critical because those professionals in the writing course want their writing to be accurate, persuasive, and impressive, and the goals of these "students" may not be the same as those of an English teacher in a traditional classroom. Writing instructors should consider five factors before teaching writing to professionals: (1) interest in the discipline in which they would be teaching, (2) the professional jargon of the new discipline, (3) efficiency over and above perfection, (4) ability to maintain a moderately relaxed attitude, and (5) isolation from professional peers. Writing instructors who think these factors would be enjoyable or a challenge may want to add the teaching of writing to members of other professions to their repertoire of marketable skills. (HTH)

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A HORSE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR: LIVING HAPPILY AS A WRITING TEACHER FOR LAWYERS AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS

I. IT IS POSSIBLE TO TEACH WRITING OUTSIDE ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS.

It is not unusual that I earn my living teaching writing; for the past four years, however, I have done this without teaching a rhetoric course or any course that is generally considered technical writing. Nevertheless, I am delighted to report that I really enjoy my work and I'm still eating! In this paper, I want to encourage you to consider branching out into teaching writing in new situations and to new audiences. I will offer examples of where these writing positions are and how you might get started in these positions. I will also offer some criteria that I found helpful in deciding whether these teaching situations will suit your interests. My presentation is based on my experience and verified in my conversations over the past year with other writing teachers who work part time in similar work.

Positions teaching writing exist in many places; for example, in Madison, Wisconsin alone, the variety of positions is great. The University of Wisconsin schools of business, nursing, law, and engineering have hired persons to teach their students to write. The Wisconsin Continuing Judicial Education program recently hired two professors of English and one ex-professor to offer a writing workshop for some of the state's trial judges. A summer "cop school" offered sessions on writing for its participants. One writing instructor works full-time helping people at a national credit union organization, and a local meat-packing plant hired a writing teacher to run workshops in writing for their management. Large and mid-sized companies, non-profit organizations, and continuing education programs for any professional group can offer writing workshops; thus they all offer a potential market.

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Let me augment those general examples with a few specific examples. During the past four years, I have found myself offering workshops in newsletter writing, letter writing for business persons, and writing public information pamphlets for a science research group; I have helped writers improve their writing on an article for the Zambian Law Review, a research report for Argonne National Laboratories, a state administrative code for prisons, and a motion for a reduced sentence for a man who robbed a chicken feed warehouse. These are teaching opportunities that I did not know existed when I started work at the law school, which leads me to believe that there are even more opportunities to teach writing than any of us realize.

Based on what clients say to me, I think there are two main reasons many professionals want to learn about writing. First, while in formal education, many people see learning about writing as a necessary and temporary evil. When they have to write in their work, however, they can see the value of effective and efficient writing, and they may want at that time the information they rejected earlier. Second, one very popular notion these days may help, and that is the common belief that almost everyone else in any given field writes poorly. (I am not questioning the validity of this point, but rather saying that the validity of it is irrelevant to setting someone to pay for your services.) Thus heads of companies hire people to help their underlings learn to write better. Appellate judges set up writing workshops for trial judges, senior partners set up writing workshops for junior partners, and law professors hire instructors to help law students improve their writing.

II. IT IS POSSIBLE TO GET THESE JOBS.

To tap this market, watch for opportunities, ask around, particularly if you know someone working in the field. Look for position in the ballpark; don't overlook small or unusual jobs if they offer a chance for you to get close to doing what you want to do.

You may work with several fields at once, although it is probably easier to specialize in a particular kind of writing. Any kind of writing that interests you may contain a market for your skills.

I would like to suggest that you do three things to help augment your career, or build one, in teaching writing to professionals: clarify your goals, start small, and remember your audience.

In teaching writing to professionals, clear goals help you focus your effort on achieving specific desired results. What two or three things most need to be done to improve writing in the area with which you are working? One of my goals with most legal writing, for example, is improving its readability, and one of the major barriers to readability is habitual use of convoluted sentence structures. Therefore, when I am showing a writer how to simplify sentence structures, I let some other things go, like use of latinate legal jargon that is unnecessary and archaic. I may save that until the writer begins to take for granted that simple sentence structures are usually better than convoluted ones. The field you want to work with will probably also use too much jargon, and will use words in ways that seem dumb to you. But you may not be able to change much of that right at first. Avoid getting distracted by too many windmills at once. You may have to put up with some irritations, at least for a while, to get your major job done.

Starting small may be a necessity because it may be hard to find a large-scale job teaching writing to a certain group. You may eventually, however,

be able to combine several little jobs and these can sometimes add up to a full-time workload.

For example, four years ago I began working at the University of Wisconsin Law School as a tutor on half time during the academic year. The next four semesters saw an increased demand for writing tutoring, until now the position is seventy percent time during the academic year and full time during summer session. The law school work also led to work with a clinical program, which led to work with law extension, which led to work with journalism extension, and so on. If you find a small job that is what you want to do, you can do a good job at it and let your reputation build gradually.

In fact I would hesitate to tackle one large job in the beginning. A small job not only helps you get started in a new field, but also allows you to build your experience. It can help you avoid big mistakes, since you will make mistakes as you work your way into the new field. A good general rule is, "don't take on more than you think you can do well, and don't risk anything you can't afford to lose." If you follow this policy, any setbacks you may have will not be too great to weather. Particularly when working with a small professional community, reliability and a solid reputation are important.

When starting to teach writing to professionals in other fields you address a new audience. If you do not remember this, you may be inclined to use the same content and approach that you use in traditional university courses; this often will not be your best choice. But you can adjust that content and approach by using a functional approach and blending theory with lots of concrete how-to information.

I find focusing on the writing's function to be important because the

people I work with want their writing to do a certain task, more than they want it to be great writing per se. They may want it to be accurate, persuasive, of impressive to their peers or clients. Similarly, the goals your clients have may not be the same ones that you have as an English teacher in traditional situations. Some of the goals, however, will be mutual, and that's where you can begin. In newsletter writing, for example, where getting the reader interested is critical, I teach people how to choose apt verbs to perk up the reader's interest. In legal drafting, where accuracy is critical, I teach writers to avoid elegant variation, keeping the same noun for the same referent even if the passage's grace is lessened. In exam writing, where organization and efficiency are critical, I help writers learn to use organization formulas so they can compose quickly. From your arsenal of writing skills, you can choose those that will most benefit your client.

Concrete how-to information is also important to your audience. Although clients don't want simplistic answers, they also don't want a lot of theory ending with "it could go either way." One very experienced and successful teacher in Wisconsin extension told me: "Our clients want two things when they leave a workshop. They want to leave believing they can do something and they want something concrete to use--a book or sheet telling them six steps to do this or four steps to do that." I find myself usually choosing a middle course between theorists and clients. I offer lists and general rules, but I also explain the why behind the lists so that the clients can know when to ignore the lists or bend the rules.

III. IT IS POSSIBLE TO NOT WANT TO DO THIS.

Given that there are jobs teaching writing to professionals and you can, with some adjustments, do those jobs, one question remains: "Do you want to teach writing to professionals?"

It is not enough, for example, to say that you would rather teach literature, but will do this, since it is the next best thing. It isn't. Editing is the next best thing: the demand for good editors is greater, the pay is better, and the adjustments required are fewer.

Teaching professionals, like teaching junior high school, is not something to do unless you like doing it. If you love good literature, for example, teaching professionals writing may be very frustrating, because you will seldom see anything that you would classify as inspired literature. Additionally, you will often deal with people who have not read any literary classics since college and who sense no loss in that.

To determine if you want to teach writing to professionals in any given field, I would like to suggest that you ask yourself five questions. These questions are not meant to discourage, but to help in deciding whether this form of teaching writing is suited to you.

First, do you find interesting the discipline with which you are working? If you don't like engineering, for example, don't plan to teach engineers to write: it will be hard on both you and the engineers. You will be impatient with their quirks and bored reading their material. For example, I would find it hard to work full time with political scientists, because their writing style is quite different from the ones I have been working with and because I am not fond of the difference. On the other hand, legal writing suits me because I admire the push for precision in legal writing and the lack of elegant variation.

The ideal may be to work with a profession that you find somewhat interesting, but have no burning desire to enter yourself. If you plan to enter the field, you may accept too readily all the unnecessary writing quirks that occur in that field. Every kind of writing can use its loving-but-persistent critics.

Second, do you like learning that field's jargon while avoiding using your own? In legal writing, I can't tell students to revise "disgorge the profits" because that is legal term with a set meaning other than rejurgitation. I can, however, tell them to quit using "in witness whereof I hereunto set my hand and seal" because it is not legally accurate or significant. I have had to learn legal jargon to tell when terms are necessary and when they are not. Knowing the jargon also helps show clients your interest in their profession, and it seems to impress the clients with your intelligence, provided you use the terms in the same way that the person you are talking to is using them.

Your own jargon, of course, is often resented. Although sometimes you need it to establish credibility as a professional in your own right, you will spend most of your energy helping clients write, and extra technical terms sometimes lead them to spend more time talking about writing and less time doing it. More importantly, if you can explain your field simply and without unnecessary technical terms, you can more easily convince the client that this is a mark of good communication and he or she should emulate it.

Third, do you like efficiency more than perfection? Most of the people you will be working with will perceive their time as very valuable, so you need to focus on efficiency as well as effectiveness. You will seldom deal with people who can keep at something until they set it just right. Instead, you will be helping them do as much as they can in the time they have. Thus helping people decrease their dread of writing the rough draft and edit effectively when editing time is limited can be your most important work. For example, most of the professional fields I work with require accuracy first, closely followed by readability, so I teach the writers to revise first with these qualities in mind.

Fourth, can you maintain a moderately relaxed attitude? Writers in all professions often take their work so seriously that they lose perspective and think either that every word of the rough draft is perfect or that their rough draft is hopeless and that they are hopeless writers. If you can put them at ease and can show them how to write and revise without any associated trauma, you can help them learn much faster and more comfortably. You become a model for your clients; if you can get excited about writing and work on it but not get tense about it, your clients can do the same.

Fifth, do you like being a horse of a different color? You will, in this kind of work, be the only writing specialist in a sea of engineers, businesspersons, or other professionals. You will often have no one available for discussions of teaching theories or strategies; you can feel lonely and isolated from professional peers. Instead of working in a familiar environment, you will often have to work patiently with individuals whose experiences and attitudes are different from yours. For example, you may have a client who thinks poetry is a waste of time. You will also often work with clients who do not enjoy writing, and it helps if you can at least understand their position. You then may be able to help them, for example, enjoy the challenge of solving the problems that turn up in writing.

You will often find clients questioning things that you take for granted in more familiar circles. For example, one of my clients, who has a science background, refuses to listen to analogies because they do not constitute proof. Although I believe analogies are useful tools for explaining and thus think his position is a misapplication of logic, I nevertheless explain every point to him without analogies. To debate the point further would not help meet our mutual goals of improving his diction and organization.

In summary, you may like teaching writing to professionals even more than

teaching a university writing course, or teaching literature. You may enjoy working with people in another field and working with the problems that turn up in writing in that field. You may like efficiently explaining the solutions to those problems in concrete, lay terms. You may like being one writing teacher in a sea of other professionals. If so, you may want to add this kind of teaching to your repetoire of marketable skills.

Helpful Sources for Teaching Writing to Professionals

Beardsley, Monroe C., Thinking Straight: Principles of Reasoning for Readers and Writers (New York: Prentice Hall, 1975)
Explains logic in readable text that includes examples and exercises. Useful reference for figuring out why an argument isn't valid. Includes short table of logical fallacies. One interesting point: words can be vague because they are ambiguous, obscure, indefinite, or create a black-or-white fallacy.

Bem, Daryl J., Beliefs, Attitudes, and Human Affairs (Belmont, CA : Wadsworth Pub. Co. 1970)
Describes how beliefs are established and changed. Useful for those interested in persuasion. Text is concise and has interesting examples.

Flowers, Frank C., Practical Linguistics for Composition (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968)
Interesting reading if you want to learn a little about how linguistics relates to writing. You do not need a linguistics background to read this, although it does get into some technical data.

Mack, Karin and Eric Skjei, Overcoming Writing Blocks (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1979) Written by psychologists. Explains why writing blocks happen and lists many ways to overcome them. Perhaps more useful for the teacher than the client with the block, because the client may be overwhelmed with the variety of solutions to the problem.

Rivers, William L., Writing: Craft and Art (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentic-Hall, 1975)
Written from a journalistic perspective. Focuses on learning the craft of writing to allow writer to touch the art. Quotable: "Readers see misspellings as oddities--like a troup of bald Boy Scouts--and must give attention to them." (p.7).

Tichy, H., Effective Writing for Engineers, Managers, Scientists (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1969)
Non-gimmicky, well-written text on writing. Chapters cover steps to better writing, ways to get started, opening paragraphs, effective organizing, outlining, common misconceptions, diction, sentences, paragraphs, editing and supervising writing.

Zinsser, William, On Writing Well 2d Ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980)
Written from a journalistic perspective. Readable, often quotable: "Fighting clutter is like fighting weeds--the writer is always slightly behind," (p. 14).